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TAGS: PGOV PREL CY

SUBJECT: "TRNC": THE MUFTI RESIGNS

REF: NICOSIA 610

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher for reason 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Beset for months by allegations he had misused his office for political gains, Turkish Cypriot Mufti Ahmet Yonluer resigned his position August 14. In actuality a mid-level "TRNC" bureaucrat who couldn't find Mecca with a map -- Yonluer's ceremonial robes, displayed prominently in his Nicosia office, remained spotless for lack of use -- he nonetheless played a symbolic if small role in bridging the bicultural gap, in February conducting the first meeting between a sitting Mufti and Cypriot Archbishop in recent memory. Yonluer seems to have proven his critics correct, however, in immediately announcing his political ambitions concurrently with his resignation. Scuttlebutt here has him challenging current "TRNC Foreign Minister" Turgay Avci for leadership of coalition partner OP, utilizing his self-professed "close ties" to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to bolster his campaign. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The mufti's resignation comes after months of speculation concerning the role he allegedly played in facilitating the murky deals leading to the founding of the Reform Party (OP), the junior partner in the CTP-led coalition "government" (Reftel). Yonluer told the press that he had decided to resign in order to protect the "Directorate of Religious Affairs" -- he was its head -- from the "abuse" the press had been heaping on his person. Losing no time in finding a second career, he claimed his resignation would allow him to enter politics. Yonluer announced he would defend the lot of the Turkish "settlers" on the island who were, in his opinion, neglected by the political parties, particularly the opposition UBP and DP. Yonluer also asserted he would maintain close ties with mainland Turkey, Erdogan, and his governing Justice and Development Party (AKP).

¶3. (C) Comment: Yonluer was a regular, if eccentric, contact of the Embassy who took a reasonably moderate and tolerant attitude toward Greek Cypriots. He was unable to leverage the fanfare over the Archbishop Chrysostomos meeting into significant progress on interfaith dialogue, however, partly because of the decentralized nature of Islam on the island -- by no means was he Chrysostomos's equivalent as spiritual leader of the Turkish Cypriots -- and partly because he lacked the respect that comes with real theological heft. It seems unlikely that "TRNC Prime Minister" Ferdi Soyer will fill the Mufti position quickly; historically it has lain vacant for long periods, and Yonluer himself had argued July 26 there was "no person on Cyprus

qualified to do his job." Further, any new candidate would come under heavy scrutiny from a T/C press eager to find signs of corruption, nepotism, or fealty to Ankara in order to further discredit the "government". While the loss of the "Director of Religious Affairs" is by no means a catastrophic setback for reconciling Cyprus's Muslim and Orthodox populations, the vacancy may derail certain opportunities for bicultural cooperation.

¶4. (C) Yonluer's likelihood of success in politics is more difficult to assess; he is certainly a colorful figure, but doesn't possess a natural constituency (thus his open attempt to court the Turkish settlers) or an affinity with Turkish Cypriot voters. His most likely next step will be to join the troubled OP. Yonluer is unlikely to be that party's savior, however. If even a fraction of the corruption allegations against OP are true, many of which involve the former Mufti, he might actually weaken it further.

¶5. (C) It will be interesting -- and potentially extremely important -- to see whether Yonluer and OP will try seriously to organize and recruit the Anatolian settlers into a coherent political force. Up until now, this large group of people have had little political role in party life and little political consciousness as a discrete group. It remains to be seen whether galvanizing such interest or consciousness can be accomplished by Yonluer or indeed anybody else. Moreover, even if such consciousness were raised, it is unclear whether increased participation by the settlers would benefit the separatist camp or the reunification camp. End Comment

SCHLICHER